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ABSTRACT

To determine what entering college freshmen think they are doing when they write, a study examined the kind of writing that goes on outside the classroom through a one-year case study of 17 students. All written material done outside of class was collected and each writer was interviewed at least once per term. A system of classification was then applied to the writing, consisting of seven items: invention, audience, voice, intention, style, arrangement and revision. Among the findings were the following: (1) students with low ACT scores did not mention a concern for the audience when they wrote, while others with scores near the middle either were oppressed and puzzled by it, or knew the audience and were rather cynical about being able to manipulate it; (2) most students thought that the purpose of writing was to transmit information, and they tended to view personal responses and opinion papers as less important than research papers; (3) few students had thought about the concept of voice and the notion that one projects a character in writing; (4) concerns with style overlapped in practice with the concerns for voice; (5) all students understood arrangement; and (6) revision took the form of superficial editing and proofreading. (HOD)

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Terrors and Affectations: Students' Perceptions of the Writing Process

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Terrors and Affectations: Students' Perceptions of the Writing Process

The context of this research project is important to understand. My interest in students' perceptions of the writing process stems from my attempt to help teachers in other disciplines teach writing. As director of an across the curriculum communication skills program at Central College, I am charged with the responsibility of directing faculty workshops designed to train other college teachers in doing a better job of teaching composition in their subject matter courses. This, in addition to directing other facets of the program, has convinced me that I need to know more about what the students are thinking about writing if I am able to offer any real help to my faculty. Those of us who teach composition and who have followed the studies in the field have come to see composition in increasingly complex, more real and descriptive ways that emphasize the process rather than merely the product. But how do we communicate this new understanding to our students when most of the texts still seem to imply that writing is linear, that errors are still primary, that conveying information in "clear" prose is the basic end of all writing. What's more, students have come to believe those texts or teachers who teach from them, and doing something different will be met with disbelief and resistance.

This study then is influenced by earlier studies by Emig (1971), Britton, et al. (1975), Beach (1976), Pianko (1979), and Sommers (1980), and is designed to find out what students who are new to academic writing on the college level think they are doing when they write. As Beach says, "Students thinking about their writing serves as a direct reflection of the effect of instruction," (p. 164) and therefore, gives us a way to anticipate and modify their thinking when making writing assignments.

Sharon Pianko says at the end of her 1979 study, "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman," that

> writing was not seen as playing an important role in the students' lives. There was little, if any, commitment to it; it was something to be carried out as quickly and as superficially as possible. There seemed to be very little gained from the composing act except meeting school requirements; and even if students wished to be more committed to the writing, the constraints placed by school on the writing environment precluded the possibilities for greater elaboration, commitment, and concern. School-sponsored writing, especially when done in one class period, does not permit sufficient time for a regrouping of energies and thoughts. (p. 12)

In order to control as many variables as possible, her study was conducted on students who wrote during class periods on specified topics. Students were video-taped and observed writing, and they knew that their compositions would not be graded. Such constraints, while necessary for certain kinds of validity, seem to falsify the writing situation and therefore produce results that may not accurately describe what really goes on when students write. I am concerned with the kind of writing that goes on outside the classroom because it seems to me that most writing

in college (except, perhaps for note taking) is done outside of class on the student's own time and in the student's own place.

Methodology

I used the case study approach. I randomly selected thirty freshman students. I ended the first full year of the investigation with seventeen students remaining in the study. Those seventeen students range between thirteen and twenty-eight on the ACT English test, which is nearly a perfect reflection of the institutional range and mean.

I collected all written material done outside of class that these students turned in for a grade or evaluation of some kind. I provided a typing service as an inducement for their participation in the project. Each writer was interviewed at least once per term; we operate on a three term calendar. Thus extensive written and spoken documents were obtained from each student.

The interviews were open ended, intended to elicit their perceptions and terms for their model of the writing process. The interviews were based on the students' recollections of particular pieces of writing that had been written recently and that both interviewer and student had in front of them. A system of classification was then applied to allow me to chart the concerns of these writers and the kinds of things that they attend to when they write. This system of classification consisted, eventually, of seven items which resembles, to some extent, the parts of traditional rhetoric: Invention, audience, voice, intention, style, arrangement and revision. This system allowed me to separate,

catalog, and evaluate by relative level of awareness, the various things that these student writers attend to when they write.

Findings

Freshman writers exhibited a wide range of awareness and a wide range of terms to articulate the process, and, as could be expected, also showed a wide range of understanding about the writing model. The most diverse range of perception within the system of classification concerns the audience. Students at the lower end of the ACT score do not mention a concern for the audience when they write, others toward the middle are oppressed and puzzled by it, and still others know the audience and are rather cynical about being able to manipulate it. The consciousness for this component begins to emerge when students talk about length and continues with increased sophistication about the character of the audience. The range of responses here mirror, from low to high, the range of ACT scores.

> ...I think what he was looking for was just something pretty much perfect...you know some teachers are just hard to write for...
>
> I wrote the paper more or less out of fear because I had never had this professor before and I heard he was hard...
>
> I didn't know how to write it. I wasn't sure if we were supposed to write it like he never read the material or not. And so I think basically wrote it like he had never read it...
>
> Whenever I write I always am afraid of what the teacher will say--"it's terrible" or something like that--but I kinda think that I don't explain things really in detail because the teacher already knows what these things are about...

> I had to know kind of what a reader would and would not know...
>
> I'm writing specifically for the professor not the lab assistant. I referred to the book to bring some things out of context that he would catch right off and he could relate to and know that I had done much reading and listening and that it wasn't just actually made up.
>
> I found if you state as close to what the teacher thinks then it's easier and you do better on the paper.
>
> I never have figured out who I write for other than my instructor. I always considered my instructor an educated person with an open mind.

Perhaps writing for the teacher isn't all bad if one can have the same attitude as the last student quoted above. He has something to say, is apparently intrinsically motivated, and has confidence that the teacher is going to give him and his paper the kind of intellectual integrity that motivates him to say something important and to say it as well as he can. Others though, who are just as conscious, it seems, are more cynical about what they're doing. Perhaps it's the kind or quality of the assignment they are working with, or perhaps their cynicism stems from previous writing experiences which treated writing as an exercise not taken with much intellectual seriousness. These students are perceptive and know how to play the rhetorical game. No wonder cynicism creeps in if the student is perceptive enough to figure out what the teacher thinks, and knows that the grade depends on regurgitating the data and parodying the teacher's mind. Others seem only to know who their physical audience is; that is, who literally will be reading their paper, but not in what spirit. They express frustration and fear over what they write and mystification over how to go about pleasing the

teacher. And some aren't concerned about the audience beyond writing eight pages or fulfilling the assignment. For them it's an exercise, piece work, to be gotten out of the way as fast as possible with as little trouble as they can manage.

Audience concerns then, are part of the model for most students new to writing on the college level, at least to the extent that they know they're writing for the professor. But what is not always understood by student writers is the quality of the audience: what characterizes the audience, what will appeal to it, what kind of openness does the audience have, and what constitutes "good" or "perfect"? But writing that is seen as trying to please without knowing what will please, is frustrating writing, fearfully wrought. Even those who have some cynicism about the process, still know what to do and can enjoy the relative success of their manipulation.

Concerns with audience overlap those concerns for intention. Most students think that the important purpose of writing is transmitting information, and they tend to view personal responses and opinion papers as less important than research papers. Even a paper that describes a questionnaire and then analyzes and interprets the results is viewed as opinion and is taken less seriously than a research paper which is "objective" and communicates "facts." But just where all this information is being passed to and why is not always clear. One thing is clear, though, and that is they know they will be judged. The intention component of the model begins with concerns for completing an assignment and getting a good grade, and then expands to

demonstrating something beyond the assignment itself, and finally to discoving something for themselves. The movement is from the extrinsic to the intrinsic; from simply following directions toward satisfying some self-defined purpose or need. The ACT English score was a less sure indicator of awareness for this component. The lower and middle ranged students tended to see intention as fulfilling some extrinsic purpose, while only those scoring at the very top of the range saw writing as fulfilling an intrinsic purpose. But I do want to point out that there is some noticeable change here even at this early stage in the study. The seventh student, quoted below, for example articulates a change in understanding about intention.

> ...to write a minimum of three pages. A research paper on any topic in baseball.
>
> ...get a good grade and have above average content.
>
> ...to understand the scientific method that we were studying...
>
> ...to get the feel of how to do a genetics experiment...
>
> ...to write down your feelings about the books and interpret themes based on lectures.
>
> ...I worry about whether I have the right things...or I presented them properly...so I was wondering if I had enough information or if I had the wrong information...
>
> It was hard not to write just information the first time and now its more of a rhetorical approach when I'm really trying to convince the reader what I'm trying to say and do it as efficiently as I can.
>
> ...since I developed my own order (by writing) I had to understand it...
>
> Certainly I enjoy writing a paper that I can indicate my opinion. After all...there's no place for opinion in my level of mathematics because I still don't know enough to interject my own opinion, but in something like religion,

> that's all it is, and if the teacher tries to keep you from developing an opinion, he's not understanding the purpose of the class.

This last student indicates a rather mature understanding of the purpose for writing and expresses a confidence in that purpose that approaches arrogance. This is the exception and not the norm. But as the composites of this component of intention are fleshed out, three different kinds of concerns emerge: 1. Doing the assignment, seeing it as an exercise for a grade, but not as something that really engages one intellectually. 2. Demonstrating something that fulfilling the assignment aids in or is directed toward, such as knowing a process. A student, for example, could demonstrate knowing a process by recording an experiment or designing, administering, and interpreting the results of a questionnaire of some kind. 3. Seeing the paper as some purposeful thing for the writer himself, a learning experience during which process the student shapes and creates ideas. But even students who understand the purpose of the assignment have some difficulty internalizing the intention for themselves. One student says, "I like to do experiments, not papers...I was actually working with the flies and having to do this little write up about it...well, you could see your results...<u>that</u>, said what happened." The lab report for this student is just a way of passing along information that is readily seen and known by observing the experiment and checking the charts. The reason for the paper, he guesses is that "...it's a lot easier for the professor that way to get the information out of your paper for him to know that you know what you're talking about."

Furthermore he doesn't think that the paper is read very carefully anyway. Writing for this student is a rather trivial exercise and the way this assignment is handled by the professor reinforces its purposelessness.

Another student talking about a series of abstracts that could be written for additional credit says, "I think we could express our own opinion. We were first supposed to state what was done, the procedure, then the results and then we could give our own whatever, judgment." But the purpose of the assignment was "to get into the literature, the science journals, to be exposed to reading the material, and also learning how to write these types of reviews." But the writing was clearly summary level and no comments were ever given on the papers to show what might be good or bad. I asked if she had any difficulty understanding the journal articles and she replied "just the details and the big words." More piece work it seems, and little intellectual engagement.

Another student comparing the task of writing a philosophy paper in which he had to argue one side of an issue, with a sociology paper that he calls analytical, says:

> The (sociology paper) was easier. It took more time to write but it was easier because you didn't have to, I didn't have to think, think of sides or ways to defend it or you know so all I do is present it, put it down. In other words put it together and organize it. Didn't have to think of anything. See, I took a survey and all the information is right there.

Writing that is used to shape arguments and refine ideas is hard work and of a different order, in these student's minds, from writing that is used to record analyses, or put into coherent form what is already there. This same student, though, does recognize the instrinsic purpose of the philosophy assignment when he says, "...at least it helps me understand the material more when I have to defend, take a side to it, you know, get into the material and take one side or another..."

The concept of voice and the notion that one projects a character in writing is a part of the model that very few students new to writing on the college level have thought about. They have been taught that writing ought to communicate "facts," "clearly," that one shouldn't use "I" and that it's really best to be objective, and voiceless. They want to appear as if they know the "material," but are unsure how to go about this except by using "big words," "sociological terms," specific words and phrases that they think will appeal to the reader. But they are timid because they are unsure of intent and audience. At best, they have a limited notion of voice dependent upon the audience.

Although separate for analytical purposes, concerns with style overlap in practice with the concerns for voice. Style describes the distance between speaker and audience while voice describes ethos, the projected character of the speaker/writer per se. But even here, style was a difficult thing to come to grips with and a source of confusion for students. It's a vague, grey area for most that encompases a multitude of nettlesome concerns.

> ...(it's) not researched, it's just thoughts from the books. It's something like a diary, but...a journal is a better word for it.
>
> ...supposed to be informal...
>
> ...too many I's in the first paragraph.
>
> ...there are a lot of prepositions and things that just don't need to be there...
>
> I had a hard time -- I didn't know if I should write in the past tense or how I should explain--if I should say, "this was done," "I did this," I'd try it one way and it would sound stupid...I've always been taught not to say I in a paper, but I did anyway. That was the only way I could make it sound right.

But on the whole, most students have not really confronted this dimension of the model and do not have much critical consciousness of how to begin thinking about it. "...I think I was just writing it in my own writing style, but I was just writing." This student is right, in that style is really the totality of everything on the page, but just how one becomes analytical about style is another matter.

The arrangement part of the model appears to be clearly understood by all students. It was neither an area that they had any difficulty with when writing their own papers nor did they exhibit much confusion about the concept in the interviews. They could all point to separate organizational parts and could describe them and explain why they were placed where they were. And all of the writers in this study wrote their papers without having written a formal outline first. Some were apologetic about that. Most of the papers though, were rather short so the necessity for much large scale planning was probably not

great and students could keep organizational structures in their head. And most of the time the subject matter and the intention, the purpose of the assignment itself, defines the order of the paper for the student. One student said about the organization, "...it was kind of a common sense..., I had to explain what the exceptionality was before I could tell the characteristics...You know, the characteristics or even the remediation...it wouldn't make sense to put the remediation first." Since most writing that these students have done involves recording or reporting what happened followed by an explanation, the problems associated with shaping an argument, finding order or creating structure do not surface. Indeed, most of their essays do have a common sense organizational pattern.

There are other areas of concern here that do not fit the rhetorical scheme exactly, but provide insights into the model of writing. These two areas have to do with looking at the whole process of writing: formulation and reformulation or invention and revision. Again, since most writing on the college level is not done extempore, in the confines of the classroom, but is researched, thought about, discussed, and then composed over a period of time, I did not think close observation of the minutiae of the process was appropriate.

Typically the process includes reading and taking notes, but little dialogue or discussion with others, and very little teacher intervention. A few students use discussion with others and do indeed talk over assignments with friends, peers,

or teachers and an even smaller number use something that resembles free-writing to get the words flowing. Those are the same students who score higher on the ACT English test, who do more extensive revision, and who see writing as a way of shaping and discovering ideas. But a majority of the students on the lower and middle ranges of the ACT scale write a draft all the way through, then "revise" that draft and type it up, perhaps making minor changes. What they do is not really revision, but superficial editing and proofreading. But how can they revise when they are not conscious of the many parts of the writing model that they could attend to as they review it? Their notion of the model for writing does not include an activity that is anything like revision as we have come to see it today. Nancy Sommers' work with revision makes explicit the two models of revision held by experienced and inexperienced writers: one type has to revise; the other cannot at all. In addition, many would not be moved to think about and see again what they had written, since the biggest task is just getting through with it. They don't have the critical distance, nor do they have the terms necessary to re-see their drafts in any other way. One student, at the high end of the ACT range talks about his paper:

> ...I would say it probably took about six to eight hours to write the paper and the reason why is because I began to write the paper using as the purpose the one that he had claimed early in the speech was the purpose--renewing the Democratic Party's stand on economic justice. It really doesn't take a careful examination to see that wasn't the purpose at all and once I had become familiar with the form of the speech I had to rework the entire structure of the paper to get where he was really coming from.

> It's halfway between an organized structure and brainstorming. I try to get as much as I can down on paper. I guess I go into that first draft without an outline just trying to organize and then from that I can decide where I want to head with the writing, and design the structure to fit...It's all just a discovery of what works with the material.

But other students on the lower end of the ACT range do not have such a model for the process of writing. They struggle by fits and starts to write the whole thing and get it handed in.

> And then I sat down and I always have problems with like the introduction because sometimes I like to carry on you know and write on and not really say much, so I wrote it up and I'd go through and each time I'd make mistakes and I'd cross it out and I really didn't talk to anybody about it. I just sort of wrote it by myself.

When I asked her how many drafts she did, she said,

> I'd say two, one or two...because it's sort of...when I did it I, you know, I'd go through and I'd write it like...when I go through it when I was writing the first time I'd cross out things and then I'd reread it and cross out more and then make more, and then I rewrote it.

And another says,

> I lock myself in one of these rooms upstairs and just wrote the paper...wrote it out and then and then I take it to...I proofread it then and took it to a friedn of mine and he typed it. I finished it the night before it was supposed to be handed in.

When I asked what he did when he "proofread,' he said,

> I read through it but I don't change...I don't have trouble with organizing ideas, I proofread it to correct that or grammar errors or make sure the sentences say what they are supposed to say. but sometimes when I start writing I don't get it all down. that's basically how I proofread.

What is wanted is a perception of writing that is close to the kind mentioned above by the student at the high end of the ACT range.

My hope is that an institution-wide program that aims at better writing instruction in all disciplines will make the kind of impact necessary for this change to occur. There are signs of hope, and I do want to offer some suggestions for change: Student perceptions of concerns for audience suggest that teachers need to define the audience fully. It is the responsibility of the teacher to clarify audience concerns, especially for those who are not confident of their writing or who have little experience with writing. And instructors need to be consistent about what they tell students concerning the audience. If they tell students that they will read in a spirit of openness, then they must, and if they stipulate other audiences, those simulations must be made real somehow. Professors must also design assignments that do indeed allow students to develop and shape their own ideas and arguments. Assignments really must be real in that sense, so that students can be led out of the notion that writing is simply for passing information, storing data, mirroring the teacher's mind, and for evaluation purposes only. Writing assignments must be explained to students in terms of their purpose. Reasons for style need to be addressed as well. Why, for example, should some reports be formal and others informal? Since there is an indication that some students see informal writing as unimportant, or less important than "researched" writing, style needs to be explained in terms of purpose and audience. Providing real models for students is an easy and effective way for notions of style to be explained.

While I do have a good sense of the parameters of student perceptions of a model for writing, I am interested in how this model will change over time. I will be conducting a four-year, longitudinal study of student perceptions of the writing process as they are affected by our skills program and look forward to documenting how student perceptions change over time. How will the model change as a result of being influenced by teachers who have been a part of the NEH-funded summer workshops? Will the changing model produce better writing? better writers? better students? Is it possible for students to develop consciousness without having process oriented assignments? Why? At the end of the study I will know what the total writing anthology of college students looks like on our campus. What, really, are they being asked to write? What kinds of things are they being asked to do when they write? What level of abstraction, analysis, or synthesis do most assignments engage? Since a good many of the assignments seem only to deal with recording and reporting rather than synthesizing or shaping arguments, are students having a trivial notion of writing affirmed for them? While a year-long period seems an adequate time span to study many phenomena, writing is complex and demands a longer look.

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